Preston Hollow Presbyterian Church
Home
Isaiah 40:1-11
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One of my favorite Garrison Keillor monologues from his popular NPR program is entitled "Exiles." It's published in a book Leaving Home: A collection of Lake Wobegon Stories. Lake Wobegon is the fictional Minnesota town that is context for Keillor's monologues.

"Dozens of exiles were back, including some their families weren't expecting because they said they weren't coming (home for Christmas this year), were sorry but it was just out of the question. But Christmas exerts powerful forces. We turn a corner in a wretched shopping mall and some few bars of a tune turn a switch in our heads and gates open and tons of water thunder through Hoover Dam, the big turbines spin, electricity flows, and we get in our car and go back, like salmon."

Who doesn't understand the compelling power of home at Christmas?

Corrine Ingquist, one of the fictional characters whose parents are prominent citizens of Lake Wobegon, has moved to Minneapolis to teach school. She is one of the returning exiles at Christmas.

"She drove up from Minneapolis, and instead of grading the papers she had brought along, baked cookies and little currant buns. She hadn't had them since she was little – amazing: a delicious smell from childhood that brings back every sweet old aunt and grandma as if they're there beside you, and you do it with a little saffron." [p. 182-183]

The idea of home, and homecoming is at the heart of great literature from The Odyssey to Look Homeward, Angel and great music. Dvorak's magnificent New World Symphony, with its haunting Largo we know as "Going Home," to spirituals sung by slaves wrenched from their homes and villages – "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot, Comin' for to Carry Me Home," and of course "I'll Be Home for Christmas," written in 1943 when millions of young Americans were far from home, scattered all over a world at war.

> I'll be home for Christmas,
> You can count on me…
> I'll be home for Christmas,
> If only in my dreams.

The idea of home is powerful. Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor says:

"My house is much more than my residence. It is my sanctuary = where I rest, beyond the reach of the noisy world, where I am fed. It is where my bed is and my books and Great Aunt Alma's quilts." [The Preaching Life, p. 156]

Every Advent I make a point of reading a few of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Letters and Papers from Prison, which he wrote to his parents and friends from his Nazi prison cell prior to his execution. A lot of his letters are about home. Near Christmas 1943:

"There have been few occasions in my life when I had to learn what homesickness means. There is no agony worse than this. During the months in prison I have sometimes been terribly homesick." [p. 112]

It is a powerful, evocative concept – "Home" is, and we will all, in some way, like Garrison Keillor's exiles, go home – as we carefully rehearse the customs precious in our families, as we bake the favorite cookies, decorate the tree – lovingly placing the last fragile, remaining ornament from our first tree decades ago. We will all go home.

Six centuries before the birth of Jesus, God's people were dreaming of home. We think about those people a lot in Advent. The Babylonians had defeated their nation; devastated their holy city, Jerusalem, leveled God's temple, and driven the people across the desert to live in captivity, in Babylonian Exile. Like any captive people they longed to go home: they told stories to their children every night about how it used to be when we were home.

One of their poets wrote what must be the most poignant passages in the Bible, Psalm 137.

"By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept.
When we remember Zion
If I forget you, oh Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither.
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you.

And then, a letter arrived in the exile community, written by one of the great prophets – who somehow remained back in Jerusalem. The letter he wrote begins at the 40th chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah with words made familiar not only because we read them every Advent, but because George Frederich Handel chose them to introduce his oratorio, "Messiah."

> Comfort, O comfort my people
> says your God.
> Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, music so beautiful that we can't hear the words without also hearing the tenor aria.

The prophet paints a vivid picture: a highway through the desert, every valley will be filled in and the hills leveled off, and over that highway a procession will move. Banners and trumpets will announce the coming of the King, returning to Jerusalem. “Get you to the high mountain,” the herald proclaims, “Lift up your voice: say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God.’”

You’re going home. The effect of that letter in the exile community must have been electric. Men stood tall again, mothers told the stories to their children that night with a new promise: “We’re going home soon.” Grandmothers began to gather up the familiar belongings: “We’re going home!”

But wait, the prophet says. Just a minute. The picture is not quite right: the royal potentate riding on his war horse, announced by banner and trumpet, victoriously leading the procession of the people back across the desert toward home. What comes next is one of the most dramatic moves in all of literature.

> He will feed his flock like a shepherd:
> he will gather the lambs in his arms,
> and carry them in his bosom,
> and gently lead the mother sheep

If that’s God, it is a very different notion of who God is. The royal potentate, powerful king, riding a war horse in proud procession, trumpet blaring, banners unfurled – that’s everybody’s favorite image of God. But a shepherd, carrying lambs in his bosom, gently leading? That is a very different, very radical theology, a brand new idea of how God acts, and maybe a brand new way of thinking about being a disciple of God’s son, Jesus Christ.

It’s difficult to think about going home for Christmas without thinking about the homeless, those who have no home– and the moral implication for those of us who do. Homelessness in this affluent culture is a disgrace and for Christians a moral, spiritual issue. It is also a very complex issue. I was pleased to learn that this church supports and participates in CitySquare – a wonderful initiative in Dallas that addresses the whole range of issues around homelessness: providing food, health care, housing, education and employment, and real hope for real change.

Novelist Kathleen Norris remembers seeing a slick, full-page ad in a magazine – for a beaded handbag costing several thousand dollars. The ad featured a model with her eyes closed, beautiful, in ecstasy with the words “Comfort and Joy” across the page. Kathleen, who is not much for luxury these days, wonders whimsically whether that beaded handbag was really up to the job of producing comfort and joy.

The Good News of Advent comes in Ancient words:

Comfort, comfort my people-
You are going home now. A shepherd will lead you and carry the lambs, carry any who are too small, too sick or weak to make it on their own.
Comfort, comfort…

One is coming who speaks tenderly to all who stumble and fall, all who labor and are heavily burdened, all who are weary and sick and sad, all who this morning are anxious, and discouraged and frightened, all who are depressed and alone and homesick. One is coming who gathers them all up and gently leads all of them – all of us – home.

His parents were homeless, after all. They left their home in Nazareth to travel all the way to Bethlehem, and after that, Egypt. In Bethlehem they made a home for the newborn as best they could. They wrapped him in bands of swaddling cloth to keep him warm and secure. They laid him in a manger and watched over him and kept him safe.

And somehow, in the midst of everything going on at this busy, noisy, frenzied time of year, you and I know that there in Bethlehem, in the night, as he is born, we are, all of us, finally, home at last.